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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DJIBOUTI 000193

SIPDIS

STATE FOR AF, AF/E, LONDON, PARIS FOR AFRICA WATCHER

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SUBJECT: COMMENTS ON ETHIOPIA, ERITREA SITUATION FROM  
DJIBOUTI'S ACTING FOREIGN MINISTER

Classified By: Ambassador Marguerita D. Ragsdale.

For reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

**¶1.** (U) Summary: Ambassador met 23 February with Acting Foreign Minister, Mahamoud Ali Youssouf, at her request, to discuss several issues, including the Ethiopia/Eritrea border issue, Djibouti's relationship with France, the recent visit of President Guelleh to Qatar, and Millennium Challenge Account eligibility (see septels). On Ethiopia/Eritrea, Youssouf said Djibouti finds the reported troop build-up on both sides worrying and is asking its neighbors to not escalate the situation. Youssouf said Djibouti will stick to its policy of neutrality and ultimately it is up to the two sides to realize the best course of action. End Summary.

**¶2.** (C) Ambassador sought Youssouf's views on the Ethiopia/Eritrea border situation, especially on reports of troop build-ups on both sides, concerns about escalation of tensions, and implications for Djibouti. Youssouf stated that the situation was worrying for the Djiboutian government. He said that it has been hearing rumors of troop build ups on both sides of the border and during a recent delay in movement of the Ethiopia-Djibouti train, those rumors were confirmed. Youssouf said neither side was admitting the build-up, preferring to characterize their actions as simply routine military maneuvers. He continued that Djibouti is sensing that there is very high tension now between the two parties and he expressed concern that the tension might inadvertently lead to hostility, even if hostility was not the immediate aim of the parties. In his search for an understanding of the trigger for current tensions, Youssouf cited Ethiopia's upcoming elections. He commented that perhaps this move is the result of Meles wanting to show his muscles in order to send a message to both his own electorate and to Eritrea that he will remain firm on border issues. Youssouf said that even though Meles has accepted the initial EEBC decision in principle, he is not ready to make concessions.

**¶3.** (C) Continuing along the same vein, Youssouf said that the realities on the ground were much more volatile and that any incident could trigger war. He said that President Guelleh has twice sent messages to Secretary General of the United Nations, Kofi Annan, asking for UN involvement in mediating the dispute rather than pouring money into border surveillance. According to Youssouf, Guelleh would prefer the money be directed to efforts of reconciliation and the political process of resolving the conflict. Youssouf commented that is was useless to spend money that could otherwise be directed at development.

**¶4.** (C) Ambassador noted that the U.S. continues to encourage Meles and Isaias to talk directly to each other about their differences. Youssouf responded that Guelleh has tried to convince Ethiopia and Eritrea to start over, to talk to each other, and not to escalate the situation into conflict. However, he said Eritrea is rigidly maintaining its earlier position that Ethiopia has to execute the initial decision of the border commission. Youssouf commented that he believes Ethiopia is also trying to maneuver politically out of the EEBC decision.

**¶5.** (C) Ambassador inquired whether the February 16th bilateral meeting in Obock between Eritrea and Djibouti had addressed the conflict with Ethiopia. Youssouf responded that the bilateral meeting is a regular occurrence in Djibouti-Eritrea diplomatic relations and was focused on cross border concerns, such as smuggling. He said there is a similar commission with Ethiopia as well, but the Eritrean-Djibouti border commission meets less frequently. Youssouf said the last commission with Eritrea was two years ago and the next would be in August 2005. He continued that these meetings were to discuss ways in which conditions on both sides of their common borders might be improved and how trade between them might be facilitated. The Eritrea-Djibouti commission has operated primarily under auspices of the Ministry of Interior, while the Ethiopia-Djibouti commission is under both Interior and Foreign Affairs. Youssouf noted that Djibouti has made known to both Ethiopia and Eritrea, within the framework of these commissions, that is has not been very pleased with both countries' penchant for using Djiboutians just across their common borders to spy on activities of the other. This activity was most prevalent at

the point where the Djibouti, Ethiopia, and Eritrea borders intersected. According to Youssouf, this activity has now stopped.

16. (C) Regarding the impact on Djibouti's economy of an Ethiopia-Eritrea armed conflict, Youssouf said he believes that neither side will try to undermine or sabotage Djibouti's economic relationship with the other in the event of conflict. In the early stages of the border dispute, Eritrea accused Djibouti of siding with Ethiopia. He said Djibouti was able to convince Eritrea that it was a simple economic relationship with Ethiopia and not bias. He continued that diplomatic relations between Eritrea and Djibouti were cut for two to three years until Eritrea realized it had to balance its relations. Youssouf said it was very difficult, but Djibouti works very hard to keep a neutral policy and it does not wish to change that. He ended by saying that Djibouti knows the two sides are building up troops along the borders, and it has told both sides not to escalate the situation. However, he said, it is ultimately up to the two countries to decide.

17. (C) Comment: An outbreak of hostilities between Ethiopia and Eritrea will yield its own set of difficulties for Djibouti, whose tribal links cross both borders. An influx of refugees into this already straining economy will be an obvious challenge. Politically, Djibouti will be obliged to walk a tightrope between the sensitivities of the warring parties, hoping its interactions with the one will not be misinterpreted by the other. It will do all it can to discourage military action and is already at pains to keep its relationships with both countries on even keel while maintaining the viability of its close economic partnership with Ethiopia. End Comment.

RAGSDALE